Review
Reviewed Work(s): A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians after Fifty Years by William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan; I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition by Twelve Southerners
Review by: Russell S. Kirby
Source: *Agricultural History*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (Apr., 1983), pp. 238-239

A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years. Edited by William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982, 190 pp., $12.95.

I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition. By Twelve Southerners. 1930; reprinted, with a new Introduction by Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980, xlviii, 410 pp., paperbound, $6.95.

The publication of *A Band of Prophets* marks another milestone in the lengthy career of the "Agrarian Manifesto" *I'll Take My Stand,* published more than half a century ago in 1930. The new book contains the proceedings of a symposium held at Vanderbilt University to commemorate the golden anniversary of the original volume and to honor the three living contributors.

Very few volumes can boast of such a long tenure of service as textual materials in American history courses or as standard examples of literary criticism. *I'll Take My Stand* has withstood the passage of time so well primarily as a literary statement. However, the book is also a strong critique, albeit a *Southern* critique, of the effects of industrialization and urbanization on an agricultural society. As several of the contributors to the symposium proceedings indicate, strong parallels exist between the economic conditions of the United States in the 1920s and the current situation in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

A Band of Prophets contains several essays which examine the impact and continuing importance of the original work. Essays by Lewis P. Simpson, Robert B. Heilman, and George Core deal with the place of *I'll Take My Stand* in the Fugitive and Agrarian movements, the historical background of agrarianism in European literature, and the relationship between the Nashville Agrarians, literary criticism, and the academic community respectively. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., examines the book in the context of American literary tradition, indicating that while *I'll Take My Stand* is "an imaginative work on culture and society," its lasting impact is due "largely to its literary quality" (p. 141).

Agricultural historians will read the essays by Charles P. Roland and John Shelton Reed with somewhat more interest. Roland examines the historical context within which *I'll Take My Stand* developed and came to fruition—the American South of the 1920s. His brief essay places the South in perspective as a region "significantly behind the rest of the nation according to every measure of progress" but which "yet preserved a great body of its traditional beliefs and values" and "bore a heavy burden of national scorn" (p. 38). Reed views *I'll Take My Stand* from a sociological perspective, and indicates that the book's cultural critique

cannot be divorced from its inherently Southern sectional bias. He suggests that the Agrarians shared many similarities with other nationalist movements, and that it was the South's condition of economic colonialism that gave rise to the literary renascence of the Nashville Agrarians. As a nationalist movement, Reed points out, the Agrarians were not very effective, but this was in large part due to their youth and their position in academic circles on the fringe of mainstream Southern society.

A Band of Prophets, then, seeks to memorialize the classic *I'll Take My Stand* by examining its cultural, literary, and historical antecedents. The symposium was also designed to indicate the book's relevance in modern times. A panel discussion with the three surviving contributors, Lyle H. Lanier, Andrew Nelson Lytle, and Robert Penn Warren concludes the volume. This discussion surely indicates that Lanier, Lytle, and Warren have active, still fertile minds. It also indicates that an agrarian critique of urban-industrial society has a place in contemporary literature. It is unclear whether the critique for the 1980s should have a peculiarly Southern cast, but the student and policymaker alike could do worse than to read the volume *I'll Take My Stand,* now reprinted in an inexpensive and durable paperback edition. Indeed, after fifty years, perhaps it is time to let that volume speak for itself, rather than through the eyes of the social scientist, historian, or literary critic.

Russell S. Kirby
Department of Geography
University of Wisconsin-Madison